



MT. CULMEN CLARION

A Newsletter of Mt. Culmen EC Church

*"What I tell you in the dark, say in the light;
and what you hear whispered, shout from the rooftops!"*

Volume 7 - Issue 1 - January 2024

Pastor

Rev. Jonathan J. Brown
717-205-6532

Lay Delegate

Rebekah Brown

Alternate Lay Delegate

Kenneth Bannon

Board President

Floyd Mast

Board Vice President

Delrea Ream

Board Secretary

Sharon Mast

Church Treasurer

Esther Stauffer

Trustees:

Floyd Mast
Barry Ream
David Rissler
Ian Pammer

Stewards:

Esther Stauffer
Joyce Garber
Kim Sweigart
Brenna Pammer

Members-at-Large:

Sharon Mast
Delrea Ream



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The Service of New Things

— Rev. Jonathan Brown

As we take a break from our shared study of the Book of Numbers, let's start out a new year by turning our attention this month to what I think is one of the most moving parts of the Bible: the forty-second chapter of Isaiah. Have you read this chapter lately?

The chapter opens with the LORD God extolling a figure he calls his 'Servant.' This is one of the famous 'Servant Songs' of Isaiah. The 'Servant' can, at first glance, be seen as a figure for Israel as a whole. But gradually, as we move through these songs, we find that this makes less and less sense. They whittle down the identity of the 'Servant' from a nation to a remnant and finally to one True Israelite – the Messiah. Only Jesus Christ (and then the whole Body of Christ, the New Israel) can fulfill Israel's God-given reason for being in the world. And if we had any doubts, as Christians, that these words mean Jesus, see how Isaiah 42:1-4 becomes Matthew 12:18-21. So what does it say of Jesus?

In these first verses, we see that Jesus is 'chosen' by God. Fully God and fully man, he inherits the election of Israel to a special relationship with God. We also find out that Jesus is 'delightful' to his Father. He's acceptable to God, satisfying to God, pleasing to God, *enjoyable* to God. The Father doesn't just love his Son; he likes him! So much so that the Father entrusts his Holy Spirit entirely to the Son: "*Behold my Servant whom I uphold, my Chosen in whom my soul delights! I have put my Spirit on him*" (42:1). The Servant, Jesus Christ, is anointed by God's Holy Spirit to fix the whole world.

We find out, next, that Jesus doesn't perform this service by making a great big ruckus. Oh, there are times for demonstration – see Jesus chasing moneychangers out of temple courts, after all – but throughout his ministry, "*he will not cry aloud or lift up his voice or make it heard in the street*" (42:2). He calmly, quietly does what is right. He's the sound of stillness and silence that reveals God in a way all the fires and whirlwinds and earthquakes never capture. Jesus doesn't require flashy pyrotechnics, fog machines, and incendiary rhetoric to carry his point through. He simply administers justice in love.

What's more, he doesn't raise a stink when he's targeted. He fiercely lamented the stony hearts of the scribes and Pharisees who viewed him as a threat, but he didn't yell for help when the soldiers came hunting him down in Gethsemane. He didn't verbally lash out at Pilate or Herod. He didn't make a scene when he went to the cross. He went, as a later Servant Song points out, like a sheep offering no resistance to the shepherd's shears – he offered himself in quiet acceptance of his Father's will. Obedient love!

(Continued on Page 3)

Mount Culmen Evangelical Congregational Church

1885 Turkey Hill Road, East Earl, PA 17519

Sunday Morning Worship: 10:00 AM

Annual Board Meeting Notes (December 2023)

Last month, the Official Board of Mt. Culmen Evangelical Congregational Church convened its meeting after the worship service on Sunday, December 3, 2023, so as to conduct the business of the church (both regular and annual). In attendance at the meeting were all 13 members of our church board: Floyd Mast, Sharon Mast, Del Ream, Barry Ream, Kim Sweigart, Dave Rissler, Esther Stauffer, Joyce Garber, Ken Bannon, Ian Pammer, Brenna Pammer, Rev. Jonathan Brown, and Rebekah Brown.

Opening with prayer and roll call, the board heard the customary reports. Of these, the treasurer's report submitted by Esther Stauffer noted:

- November 2023 income of \$3,978.50
- November 2023 expenses of \$4,770.45
- a November 30 ending balance of \$8,402.02

The secretary's report was accepted unanimously on the motion of Kim Sweigart, seconded by Dave Rissler. The treasurer's report was accepted unanimously on the motion of Del Ream, seconded by Ken Bannon.

The stewards reported that they had duly held their annual compensation meeting with the pastor, and would have a compensation recommendation to bring before the board.

The trustees reported that the window-mounted air conditioning units in the fellowship hall had been removed before the official onset of winter, and that Floyd would have extra keys for the shed made for the trustees and pastor.

Prior to the customary old and new business, the board addressed its special once-a-year responsibilities entrusted to the Annual Board Meeting. The Annual Board Meeting, for instance, is responsible to carry out an examination of the members of the church, to see if any need to be charged for a disciplinary process. Of course, no charges were preferred against any church members.

The stewards formally presented their recommendation that the pastor's compensation be raised in accordance with the Social Security Administration's Cost of Living Adjustment of 3.2% for next year. The adoption of the stewards' recommendation was moved by Del Ream, seconded by Kim Sweigart, and passed unanimously.

Next followed elections. The Annual Board Meeting is the venue for electing stewards, whose nomination must (per church bylaws) come from the pastor. Two stewards – **Joyce Garber** and **Esther Stauffer** – had their three-year terms run out in December 2023, necessitating an election. With their consent, Pastor Jonathan renominated both Esther and Joyce. This nomination was seconded by Ken Bannon. Joyce and Esther were both unanimously re-elected to another three-year term, until December 2026.

The Annual Board Meeting is also the venue for electing a lay delegate and an alternate lay delegate, each of whom serve for one-year terms. For the position of lay delegate, Kim Sweigart nominated **Rebekah Brown** for another one-year term; this was seconded by Esther Stauffer, and her election passed unanimously. For the alternate lay delegate, Esther Stauffer nominated Ken Bannon for another one-year term; this was seconded by Rebekah Brown, and his election also passed unanimously.

Finally, Pastor Jonathan introduced a motion to officially set the date for the 2024 Annual Congregational Meeting to be Sunday, January 21, 2024, during the latter portion of our regular worship hour. This motion was seconded by Ken Bannon and passed unanimously by the board.

Under the heading of old business, Esther Stauffer reported that she had renewed our Certificate of Deposit that is entrusted to the Bank of Bird-in-Hand. She had had to sign a new document for it, and received a copy for church records. The annual yield rate for our Certificate of Deposit will be 5.27% for the next thirteen months. Both Floyd Mast and Pastor Jonathan voiced the board's thanks to Esther for taking care of the matter.

(Continued on Page 3)

(Continued from Page 2, "Board Meeting Notes")

As further old business, the board also returned to the topic of lawn care again, as several quotes had been secured from possible services. Kenny reported on Operation Green Lawn, whose quote for annual care at the church would cost in excess of \$1900. Esther reported on Nicole's Landscaping, whose quote was also, she told the board, more than our church could easily accommodate. However, Esther had also been in contact with TruGreen, our current lawn-care provider, and gotten a written confirmation that only four treatments would be provided in 2024, just as we had wanted, if we choose to remain with them for the coming year. Floyd noted that we still have time to seek a few alternatives, if we wish. Pastor Jonathan made the observation that, since lawn care falls under the broader category of maintenance of church property, this topic would properly be the province of the trustees, to be discussed at the trustee meetings which are required in our church bylaws. Pastor Jonathan encouraged the trustees to revive the practice of holding trustee meetings. This will not only help the trustees to each lend their voice, but will also allow the trustees to work more efficiently and then present their considered recommendations to the board.

Under the heading of new business, the board had few other items of business. In light of the official date for the Annual Congregational Meeting, Rebekah Brown introduced a motion to set the date of our first-quarter fellowship meal for the same date, January 21, after the meeting. This was seconded by Floyd Mast and passed unanimously.

Finally, Esther noted that last year, we had allotted \$25 as a Christmas gift for Mabel Newswanger, who provides the cleaning services for our church. This year, Mabel's husband abruptly passed away on October 8. Esther and Mabel had spoken afterward, and Mabel had expressed her gratitude for all our support. (If you know anyone looking for cleaning services, Esther told the board incidentally, Mabel is very good and looking for more jobs for next year!) Esther asked what we wished to do about a Christmas gift this year. Del Ream made a motion to give Mabel \$50 for this Christmas. This was seconded by Kim Sweigart and passed unanimously. Rebekah also asked Esther to inquire whether mulching and weeding are things Mabel would be interested in, in case Mabel would have the skill-set to handle some of the lawn care / landscaping tasks we've been so concerned to find someone for.

There being no further business after that, on motion of Barry Ream, as seconded by Kim Sweigart, the board adjourned its meeting, to reconvene following the worship service on **Sunday, January 7, 2024.**

Statistical Report (November 2023)

<u>Worship Service Attendance</u>		<u>Offerings Received</u>
11/05/23	26	\$1,290.00
11/12/23	30	\$825.00
11/19/23	26	\$815.00
<u>11/26/23</u>	<u>27</u>	<u>\$450.00</u>
Average:	27 (27.25)	Total: \$3,380.00

<u>Birthdays (January 2024)</u>			<u>Anniversaries (January 2024)</u>
1/2 – Leroy Stoltzfus	1/7 – Delores Jaxel	1/11 – Barty Messner	1/26 – Red and Veanna Baxter
1/13 – Betty Musser	1/15 – John Sparr (Bob and Barbara's son)	1/21 – Jackie Eberly (Abby's daughter-in-law)	1/29 – Robert and Barbara Sparr

(Continued from Page 1, "The Service of New Things")

As Jesus administers justice, during his earthly ministry and even now, he has a distinctive way of doing it – and not doing it. Isaiah foretells that the Servant faithfully does justice in a gentle and considerate way: *"A bruised reed he will not break, and a faintly burning wick he will not quench"* (42:3). He knows when we're acting out of wounds and hurts, he knows we're weak, scared, discouraged, weighed down. And he treats us accordingly. A ninth-century Syriac theologian put it like this: Jesus "will not be hard or angered with those who have a feeble spirit, he will not render powerless that strength that is left to them, but he will lead them back to virtue with kindness." Good news!

(Continued on Page 4)

(Continued from Page 3, "The Service of New Things")

In our world where power and cunning seem like the only way to get things done (and the world Isaiah lived in was no different), it must've seemed as though such tenderness could only slow progress to a crawl, make it unlikely to ever dig out of this mess. And yet, even without breaking the fragile who've been wounded, and even without brushing past and snuffing out the precarious hope that so faintly burns in our hearts, Jesus is going to press on. *"He will not grow faint or be discouraged till he has established justice in the earth, and the coastlands wait for his law"* (42:4). Jesus is not going to miss his determined purpose. He won't fall down, won't grow dim, won't weaken. He won't be crushed or break, won't be overcome, won't lose his fight. He's going to reach his goal, which is to establish worldwide justice, to fix the world the way it's meant to be in God's eyes. No wonder the distant coasts and islands, the far-off places, are – know it or not – eagerly waiting to hear his instruction, his teaching, his law... his gospel!

The next stretch of the chapter, 42:5-9, is a speech addressed from the LORD to the Servant – or, we know can say, from the Father to the Son. But first, pay attention to how Isaiah describes God in 42:5. He's the one who stretched out the skies above, like a big tent enclosing creation. He's the one who hammered out the earth under our feet, the foundation we all stand on, the basis of our existence. He's the one who puts the breath of life in the lungs of every creature that walks the earth, the one who gives the spark of soul to everybody. There's no one who isn't naturally in debt to *"the LORD who created the heavens and stretched them out, who spread out the earth and what comes from it, who gives breath to the people on it and spirit to those who walk in it"* (42:5). His words deserve our attention!

So pay attention to what the LORD says to his Servant. *"I am the LORD! I have called you in righteousness"* – the Father has called his Son. Throughout the Old Testament, but especially in the prophecies of Isaiah, we meet this image of God calling people by name – Israel as a whole, or specific individuals with whom he establishes a special relationship. From eternity, the Father has called the Son by Name; now, in time, the Father calls his Son by name as a human being. The Father has called Jesus into an abiding face-to-face relationship, one of mutual familiarity and closeness with each other. What's more, says God, *"I will take you by the hand and keep you"* – the Father will keep his Son. The Father will sustain and protect his Son – even through the ordeal of the cross. The Father, as eternally the source of life which he gives intimately to his Son, now is the unfailing source of his Son's human faithfulness and steadfastness, giving him to have life in himself (42:6).

The LORD goes on to tell the Servant that he has a mission for him. So the Father has called Jesus, will keep Jesus, and entrusts a mission to Jesus! And what is that mission? First, *"I will give you as a covenant for the people"* – the people, that is, whom God had long called since the days of Moses. Jesus, Isaiah seems to be saying, is the one in whom Israel will discover the promised 'new covenant' with the LORD. After all, didn't Jesus offer the cup of the New Passover as *"the new covenant in my blood"* (Luke 22:20)? Through the covenant-establishing sacrificial meal that brings us to communion with God, Jesus is *"the mediator of a new covenant"* (Hebrews 12:24). And this was to fulfill the old promise of *"a new covenant with the House of Israel and the House of Judah"* (Jeremiah 31:31), with God and his age-old people; we have been grafted into that promise (Romans 11:11-24).

In the same breath, the LORD identifies the Servant as not only a 'covenant for the people' but also gives him as *"a light for the nations"* (Isaiah 42:6). Jesus, Isaiah wants us to know, won't merely be there to bring good things to the Jewish people. He's being sent to chase the darkness away from all nations, all those formerly estranged from God. He's the Light of the World! Simeon, holding the infant Jesus, proclaimed that he was *"a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel"* (Luke 2:32), while Paul later testified that he knew from prophets like Isaiah that the Messiah was going to have to *"suffer, and that, by being the first to rise from the dead, he would proclaim light both to our people and to the Gentiles"* (Acts 26:23). Simeon and Paul alike have these words of God through Isaiah in mind. By completing his mission, Jesus has brought the Light to light – a light we go out to spread.

In restoring Israel's covenant and enlightening the nations, the Servant is on a mission *"to open the eyes of the blind"* (Isaiah 42:7). To 'open the eyes of the blind' is a work of the LORD himself (Psalm 146:8), and of course Jesus literally did that (e.g., Matthew 15:30-31). But 'blindness' is also an image of spiritual non-perception, of being unable to receive God's wise instruction; and Jesus, whether dealing with Jew or Gentile, has come to make us perceptive and receptive to his Father's beautiful goodness and truth.

(Continued on Page 5)

(Continued from Page 4, "The Service of New Things")

The other part of Jesus' mission focused on here is *"to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon, from the prison those who sit in darkness"* (Isaiah 42:7). The psalmists had pictured extremely hard and hopeless situations as like being in prison waiting for execution: *"Some sat in darkness and in the shadow of death, prisoners in affliction and in irons, for they had rebelled against the words of God and spurned the counsel of the Most High, so he bowed their hearts down with hard labor; they fell down with none to help"* (Psalm 107:10-12). Later in Isaiah 42, the prophet complains that Israel as a nation can't fulfill the mission of the Servant because they themselves are *"blind"* and are collectively *"trapped in holes and hidden in prisons"* (Isaiah 42:18, 22). The ultimate prison was the underworld, Sheol, a dark dungeon behind bars (Job 17:13-16).

But here's the wonderful news Isaiah is throwing before us: Jesus, Servant of the LORD, Son of the Father, has been sent to bring out the prisoners! When we confess in the Apostles' Creed that he *"descended into hell,"* what we mean is that, between his death and his resurrection, Jesus *"went and proclaimed to the spirits in prison"* (1 Peter 3:19). Having *"descended into the lower parts of the earth,"* thereafter *"when he ascended on high, he led captivity captive"* (Ephesians 4:8-9). And we can find, even in this life, that Jesus is one who sets us free from hopeless cases, free from chains of sin, free from wasted lives and darkened ways.

If earlier God had defined himself by his works of creation (Isaiah 42:5), now he pronounces that he won't share his glory and his praise with would-be competitors, the idols that have been chaining the nations into their dark prisons. *"I am the LORD! That is my name! My glory I give to no other; nor my praise to carved idols"* (Isaiah 42:8). Idols, in the sense of carved objects of adoration which pagans considered to be transformed into the earthly presence of their gods, were a convenient but deeply corrupting Gentile invention. So deeply were Gentile nations identified with idolatry that they could be called *"the kingdoms of the idols"* (Isaiah 10:10). But the 'gods' the idols were carved to express were petty frauds, and by latching onto them, the pagan Gentiles were warping their own souls in ridiculous ways – so the prophets tell us repeatedly (e.g., Isaiah 44:9-20). And yet Israel had repeatedly gone astray into making and adoring the same kinds of idols and many of the same false gods they expressed (e.g., Micah 5:13), despite having been warned to get rid of all such things (Deuteronomy 7:5), all *"lawless idolatry"* (1 Peter 4:3).

But, Isaiah is telling us, God has commissioned his Servant to liberate both Jews and Gentiles from these old failures and from any more 'modern' form of idolatry that, under whatever more sophisticated cover, tries to hoodwink us into transferring God's proper praise and God's proper glory onto some substitute, some competitor. When we were yet *"led astray to mute idols, however you were led"* (1 Corinthians 12:2), Jesus swooped in to turn us away *"from idols to serve the living and true God"* (1 Thessalonians 1:9). Jesus came to bring us into communion with the God who is Truth, the God who is Goodness, the God who is Life!

And this God here announces, in the next words Isaiah records, that *"the former things have come to pass, and new things I now declare; before they spring forth, I tell you of them"* (Isaiah 42:9). Now, through the Servant's mission, an entirely new sort of divine work was about to take place. St. Cyril of Alexandria explained the 'new things' of this verse like this: *"Our Lord Jesus Christ promised life in the age to come, namely, the life of incorruption and holiness and righteousness, the kingdom of heaven, the glorious participation in the spiritual goods, the fruits of gentleness, the reward of piety, the crown of life for him."* God is most definitely *"doing a new thing"* in that (Isaiah 43:19)!

Finally, Isaiah breaks forth in a call for us to respond to this message that new things are on the horizon (42:10-17). This is an announcement that God is about to go forth as a warrior: *"The LORD goes out like a mighty man; like a man of war he stirs up his zeal; he cries, he shouts aloud, he shows himself mighty against his foes"* (42:13). In the former times, God had actually been considerably restrained – but not anymore (42:14)! Now he's going to destroy the idols and shame the idolaters (42:17), he's going to lay waste everything that stands in his way (42:15), he's going to march to his people's rescue and guide them in new ways despite their blindness and ignorance, making even the roughest terrain like level ground beneath their feet (42:16). This is a world-shaking campaign of salvation! And the mystery Isaiah is saying is that it happens through the Servant just described. Through the gentle and quiet mission of Jesus who achieves justice without breaking the bruised wick or quenching the flickering flame, God is waging war on all the former and present darkness, and ushering in the victory of the light (42:13)!

(Continued on Page 6)

Upcoming Church Events

- **Communion Service** – Sunday, **January 7**, 2024, ring in the new year in the right way: with Jesus himself! Pastor Jonathan will celebrate the Eucharist and distribute Holy Communion via the ministry of the stewards. “On the Lord's Day, gather together to break bread and give thanks, first confessing your failings so that your sacrifice may be pure; nobody who is in conflict with his companion should gather with you until they are reconciled, so that your sacrifice is not defiled” (*Didache* 14.1-2). Please come spiritually prepared: “*Let a person examine himself, then, and so eat of the bread and drink of the cup*” (1 Corinthians 11:28).
- **Annual Congregational Meeting** – On Sunday, **January 21**, 2024, after an abridged worship service, we will hold our annual congregational meeting during the latter half of our Sunday worship time. The annual congregational meeting is a very important part of our church life, as it allows us to take up together some of the issues that affect us all. Per our church bylaws, this will be the time for hearing reports from the church's officers and pastor, for electing trustees, and for other needful business.
- **Fellowship Meal** – Also on Sunday, **January 21**, 2024, following the conclusion of our congregational meeting, everyone in attendance is invited into the Fellowship Hall for our first-quarter potluck fellowship meal! If you can bring food to share, please do; and if all you can do is bring an appetite, please do that – we always have more than enough food to go around! So in either case, please join us for time spent together.

Upcoming Community Events

- **Winter Feast** – On Saturday, **January 13**, 2024, from 3:00pm until sold out, the Bowmansville Fire Hall (146 West Maple Grove Road, Bowmansville) will host a winter feast featuring wild game (including whitetail deer, bear meatballs, venison meatloaf, elk, turkey, wild boar) and sides (mashed potatoes, lima beans, peas, pepper cabbage, homemade bread, etc.), for dine-in or take-out, by donation.
- **Concert** – On Saturday, **January 20**, 2024, at 7:00pm, Garden Spot Village (433 South Kinzer Avenue, New Holland) will host the group Perfect Harmony presenting the program “Then Sings My Soul,” featuring 30 hymns and discussing their relationship to the ministry of Billy Graham.
- **Community Meal** – On Monday, **January 22**, 2024, from 5:30pm to 6:30pm, CrossNet Ministries will provide a free community meal at their youth center (110 West Franklin Street, New Holland).
- **Origins Series** – On Mondays in January, Garden Spot Village is putting on a series of talks relating to science and the Bible. On **January 22**, at 7:00pm, Lancaster Bible College professor Dr. John M. Soden will present based on his book *In the Beginning... We Misunderstood: Interpreting Genesis 1 in Its Original Context*, on why Genesis was written and how it relates to the beliefs of Israel's neighbors about creation. On **January 29**, at 7:00pm, GSV resident Dr. Val Dunham will speak on “Is Galileo Still on House Arrest?”

(Continued from Page 5, “The Service of New Things”)

Faced with the astounding victory of God in Christ's gentle justice, what should we do but “*sing to the LORD a new song*”? The people of far-off coastal regions should celebrate the new things God will do: “*Sing to the LORD a new song, his praise from the end of the earth, you who go down to the sea, and all that fills it, the coastlands and their inhabitants*” (42:10). The people from desert cities, villages, and mountains should celebrate just as much: “*Let the desert and its cities lift up their voice, the villages that Kedar inhabits; let the inhabitants of Sela sing for joy, let them shout from the top of the mountains*” (42:11). Everybody in the world has a reason to celebrate, if only they'll serve God in the image of the Servant Jesus: “*Let them give glory to the LORD, and declare his praise*” (42:12).

This is January, the time of year we customarily consider a break with former things and the beginning of something new. Well, sing for joy! Because God has declared new things, endless new things, in Jesus. This is the Jesus who won't give up. This is the Jesus who can't be stopped. This is the Jesus who won't bowl us over or kick us when we're down, the Jesus who won't snuff us out or toss us aside. But this is the Jesus who makes no peace with our idols, who quietly breaks them no matter how many we carve out for ourselves. This is the Jesus who is all about the justice of God. He came to set us free, to shine light on our lives, to seal a new covenant with God. This is the Jesus who came to do his Father's will. And his Father's will is to be the God of Freshness, the God whose new campaign against death and darkness is the delight of an astounded creation. So let us sing and shout with our new lives to the One who accomplishes so many new and wonderful things in his Faithful Son and Servant: Jesus Christ our Lord!

Christmas Cantata 2023

Our thanks to this year's cantata choir: Esther Stauffer, Sharon Mast, Jean Hess, Kim Sweigart, and Ian Pammer; a sixth member, Kenny Bannon, was unable to attend. Thanks also to our choir director, Abby Eberly. The choir presented the cantata "The First Noel: The Birthday of a King," arranged by Russell Mauldin and co-created by Russell Mauldin and Sue C. Smith, during our worship service on Sunday, December 17, 2023, to an audience of forty-six other worshippers of the God whose Christmas gift to the world is salvation.



(Continued on Page 8)

(Continued from Page 7, "Christmas Cantata")

The cantata began with the choir singing "The Birthday of a King Medley," drawing on the words of Isaiah 9:6, the traditional French carol "Sing We Now of Christmas," and William H. Neidlinger's song "The Birthday of a King." After an introductory narration, the choir next sang "Glory, Glory in the Highest," with Ian Pammer as soloist, and the title carol "The First Noel." With a narration emphasizing the drama of Mary and Joseph's journey to Bethlehem, the choir thereafter sang Mariah Carey's "Jesus, Born on This Day," with Kim Sweigart as soloist, and then – shifting to the scene of the angelic annunciation to the shepherds – the Rhymers' song "Light of the Stable," drawing on the lyrics of "Angels We Have Heard on High."



From there, the narration began to point ahead to the ministry of Jesus Christ, all the way to "a cross, a grave, and a resurrection," leading the choir to sing Bob Kauflin's song "In the First Light." Then the choir sang their stirring penultimate song "Jesus at the Center," written by Adam Ranney, Israel Houghton, and Micah Massey, which repeatedly pointed to "Jesus at the center of it all." At this point, the choir paused as Pastor Jonathan came forward to the pulpit to offer an impromptu prayer, tying together the songs with a plea for all in attendance to make room in their lives for Jesus' kingship. The choir closed the cantata by reprising its first song in the "Birthday of a King Finale," after which – following the congregation's many plaudits of their performance – they honored their faithful director, Abby Eberly, with the gift of a commemorative flower arrangement.

Featured Hymn: “Fight the Good Fight with All Thy Might”

Original Lyrics by John S. B. Monsell (1860)

Commentary by Pastor Jonathan

1. Fight the good fight,
With all thy might,
Christ is thy strength, and Christ thy right;
Lay hold on Life, and it shall be
Thy Joy and Crown eternally.
2. Run the straight race
Thro' God's good grace,
Lift up thine eyes, and seek His face;
Life with its “Way” before thee lies,
Christ is the path, and Christ the prize.
3. Cast care aside
Upon Thy guide
Lean, and His mercy will provide;
Lean, and the trusting soul shall prove
Christ is thy life, and Christ thy love.
4. Faint not nor fear,
His arms are near,
He changeth not, and thou art dear;
“Only believe,” and thou shalt see
That Christ is all in all to thee.

Original text taken from John S. B. Monsell,
Songs from the Song of Songs, and Other Poems
(Torquay: E. Cockrem, 1860), 25-26.

See also revision in John S. B. Monsell,
Hymns of Love and Praise for the Church's Year
(London: Bell and Daldy, 1863), 163-164.

Appears in *The Singing Church* as hymn #458.

For this month's hymn, we have an Irish-born Anglican priest to thank. John Samuel Bewley Monsell (1811-1875) was born in St. Columb's House in Derry, Ireland – now called Londonderry, Northern Ireland – on Saturday, March 2, 1811, to Rev. Thomas Bewley Monsell and his wife Jane Rea. John was about two years old when his sister Diana was born in 1813, and four when his brother Charles was born in 1815.

When John was around nine years old, his father Thomas gained an appointment as the new Archdeacon of Derry, a senior church position within the diocese (a church district). Once John grew up, he went off to Dublin to study at Trinity College; his father joined him quickly in the city by being appointed a member of the chapter governing Dublin's Christ Church Cathedral.

John earned his bachelor of arts degree in 1832, and two years later, late in March 1834, John was ordained an Anglican deacon and sent to his first pastoral assignment: back home, or near enough. He took on service as the curate of Templemore, a parish in the Diocese of Derry (which that year was merged with its neighbor into a Diocese of Derry and Raphoe).

He did not serve there long, but while he was there, a significant turn took place in John's life. On Thursday, January 15, 1835, he married Anne Waller, the daughter of Bolton Waller, a quite prominent barrister in County Limerick (and soon to become a county magistrate). At the time they married at Kilcorman Church in County Limerick, John was 23 years old; Anne was between six and nine years his senior. Later that year, John was ordained to the Anglican priesthood; and the next year, 1836, he was appointed to serve St. Augustine's Chapel of Ease, as he and Anne welcomed their first daughter, Elizabeth Isabella Monsell.

During these years, John became active in the work of the London Hibernian Society for Establishing Schools and Circulating the Holy Scriptures in Ireland, which was an organization devoted to advancing the Protestant religious cause in Irish Catholic contexts through Protestant schools and Protestant editions of the Bible. John's second child and first son, Thomas Bewley Monsell, was born around the same time; and in 1837, John published his first book, *Hymns and Miscellaneous Poems*, which he dedicated to his parents; it included a lullaby he'd written for Elizabeth as well as another poem for Thomas.

In November 1838, the 27-year-old John was transferred to the parish of Dunboe, still in County Londonderry. This is where his wife Anne gave birth to their third child, a daughter they named Jane Diana Monsell, in 1839; and in the same year, he contributed one of his sermons to a volume of *The Irish Pulpit*. A couple days after Christmas 1840, their family expanded with the birth of a second son, Bolton Alfred James Monsell. By this point, John was going through several transfers, first to the town of Coleraine (east of Derry) and then, at last, to Belfast. At first he had a curacy there, but in 1843 he was assigned as chaplain for the newly-founded Ulster Magdalene Asylum, an institution to house 'penitent females' (i.e., unwed mothers, former prostitutes, and other women who'd fallen on the wrong side of the law). By that time, Anne was already pregnant; she gave birth to William Thomas Monsell shortly before the year's close.

(Continued on Page 10)

(Continued from Page 9, "Featured Hymn")

In 1844, however, John – a married father of five – took a leave of absence to tend to his brother Charles, a priest in County Limerick, who'd fallen ill. Charles and his wife Harriet exerted a significant theological influence on John in the direction of the Oxford Movement, a high-church quest to reintegrate older Christian tradition into Anglicanism. Then, in February 1845, John received appointment as one of the domestic chaplains to his bishop Richard Mant, of the Diocese of Down, Connor, and Dromore. In short succession, John was named to his diocese's education committee and took active roles in examining ordination candidates, supporting the Ulster Institution for the Deaf and Dumb and the Blind, and advocating for an enlarged dispensary for medical care in his city.

But it wouldn't be his city for long. In October 1846, John – now in his mid-thirties – was transferred out to the rural parish of Dunaghy. Not long thereafter, John's father Thomas passed away; and several months after that, around March 1847, John was reassigned again, becoming rector of Ramoan in County Antrim and also chancellor of the diocese. Although his wife Anne was soon pregnant again, sadly this next child would be stillborn in February 1848. This was to be the year of a failed Irish nationalist revolt, one of the ringleaders being John's brother Charles' brother-in-law William O'Brien, who was sentenced to death. John was among those who pled, successfully, for William's sentence to be commuted to exile. John also became actively involved in the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts, a major Anglican society dedicated to promoting missionary work in British colonies.

By 1850, after the birth of another son in Ramoan in November 1849 (whose name I can't find), John put out another book of poetry, *Parish Musings in Verse*, which he described as "the unpremeditated aspirations and utterances of the heart of one engaged in the active scenes of parish labor." Later that year, John's cousin William – a Member of Parliament – caused a considerable stir by converting to Catholicism; one can only imagine what John thought about that. No doubt, though, John's attentions were diverted considerably when, just a month later, his brother Charles died in Naples, Italy, where he'd moved due to chronic ill health, while their sister Diana then died in England just three months after that. Their mother died the following year. John coped by writing *Come, for All Things Are Ready: A Tract on the Lord's Supper*. (Charles' widow Harriet, meanwhile, founded a new Anglican religious order of Augustinian nuns, initially called the Sisters of Mercy but later renamed the Community of St. John Baptist.)

In the wake of this multitude of personal tragedies, John was offered a new position, that of vicar of the parish church of Egham, a town in Surrey, England. When he accepted and transferred there in April 1853, it was his first posting outside his Irish homeland. But John had only been in England for six months when the Crimean War broke out, in which an initial dispute over the rights of Catholics versus Orthodox Christians in the Muslim Ottoman-ruled Holy Land spun into a war effort by several European powers to defend the Ottoman Empire and oppose Russian aggression. Upon the Allied victory in the Battle of the Alma River in September 1854, John wrote a celebratory poem, "What Will They Say in England?", which soon was being republished throughout the kingdom.

He would, the next year, write a similar poem, "Sebastopol Is Won!", celebrating victory in the 11-month siege of Sevastopol, Russia's main naval base in Crimea. Between these popular poems, however, the war struck home severely for John. His 18-year-old son, Lt. Thomas Bewley Monsell, serving with the Nineteenth Regiment, died about the transport ship *Croesus* while en route to Malta to fight. Several months later, the *Croesus* itself caught fire and burned. All that could be brought home to John was the officer's sword Thomas had carried – "of his dear things, the only one of all preserved from fire and flood by God's good care," John wrote. Over the next several years, John poured all his grief over his lost son into a flurry of poems, later published in a 48-page booklet titled *His Presence, Not His Memory*, in which John addressed the Mediterranean Sea as "holy, grave of my dear child."

The following year, in July 1856, Trinity College in Belfast honored John by conferring on him two new degrees, LL.B. and LL.D., in the realm of law. By the end of the following year, John had published another collection called *Spiritual Songs for the Sundays and Holydays Throughout the Year*, consisting of poems "written during a winter spent, for the sake of health, by the shores of the Mediterranean, under the orange and olive groves of Italy" – a place he had undoubtedly gone for the winter of 1856-1857 to, at least in part, pay tribute to Thomas (and perhaps also to Charles). "But their aim," he said of his songs, "is the highest which the human mind can propose to itself: to help men along the way to heaven."

(Continued on Page 11)

(Continued from Page 10, "Featured Hymn")

As the 1860s began, not only did John begin to gain grandchildren (thanks to his daughter Jane, who'd married Rev. Charles Wellington Furse and now, in early 1860, gave birth to a son whom she named John after her father), but his literary output began to pick up, as with his 1860 booklet *Songs from the Song of Songs, and Other Poems*, which he wrote after having briefly traveled from Egham to stay a while in Torquay, likely out of concern for his ill daughter Elizabeth. In this collection of nine poems is the first place in which our featured hymn made an appearance as the seventh. Publishing these poems "at the request of some friends who desired to possess them," he offered to donate all the proceeds from their sale to the parish where he'd been staying in Torquay, to help their organ fund.

In Lent 1861, back at Torquay again while preparing his *Prayers and Litanies Taken from Holy Scripture, Together with a Calendar and Table of Lessons*, John preached a sermon series on the Beatitudes while still caring for Elizabeth, whose condition was worsening. Too sick to go to church, she had asked John "to depart from my usual habit and to write them, that she might hear them before they were preached, and thus have her share in the teaching... Thus, while confined to that bed of sickness from which she never rose again, she heard each week the lesson, which I fondly felt she had herself suggested. ... Day by day, week by week, her precious life was marvelously prolonged until, having heard the last of the series on Good Friday and received the Holy Communion on Easter Day, she, on the Monday in Easter week, passed into the Paradise of God," still in her twenties. Then, at the request of the parishioners there, as expressed five days later by a former bishop of Jamaica who'd retired to Torquay, John rushed his sermons to publication as soon as the Easter season had drawn to a close.

The following April, John came across an article in the *London Quarterly Review* which, in reviewing a bunch of the most recent hymnals, complained that "we have compiled hymnals *ad nauseam* upon all sorts of plans... as if a hymn-book was to be an independent service-book instead of being a complement to the Prayer-book." It urged the Church of England to match "the soft utterances of Asia and the deep teaching of the Greek odes, the terse diction and subdued fire of the Latins and the bold energy of the Germans, and to weld them together with the fervent raptures of those at home who have wandered from her fold and the chastened devotion of her more dutiful children." In its eloquent call for "a *hymnarium* worthy of our history and our language," John had found a purpose.

That summer, John threw himself into an intense stretch of hymn-writing, hoping by it to "illustrate... that such portions of our divine worship should be more fervent and joyous, more expressive of real and personal love of God, than they are in general found to be," as he wrote that November. At the start of the next year, John took his older hymns (including "Fight the Good Fight," scheduled now for the Nineteenth Sunday after Trinity) and published them together with new ones in *Hymns in Love and Praise of God for the Church's Year*, dedicated "in honor of God, and to the memory of two dear children [Thomas and Elizabeth] now in rest with him." In its preface, he remarked:

We are, alas! too distant and reserved in our praises. We sing not as if our hearts were on fire with the flame of divine love and joy, as we should sing to him and of him who is chief among ten thousand and altogether lovely. If we loved him as we ought to do, we could not be so cold. Toward the removal of this dullness and formality, few things are more helpful than glowing tender hymns: they quicken as well as convey the desires of the soul, they say for us what many are unable to say for themselves, what a lifted eye, a voiceless breathing, has often said to God for us all; and in the use of them, the spirit catches their heavenly fervor, and draws nearer to him it is adoring. That these hymns are altogether of such a character, their author does not venture to assume. They are, however, the utterance of a soul conscious of most intense longings for closer communion with God; and, as such, they may be helpful to others, gladdening and warming spiritual life in some hearts and homes of his people. Their name tells what they desire to express – love to, and praise of, God – and if they tend in any degree to make that love in others more fervent and real, that praise more joyous and bright, they have not been written in vain.

In light of his sister-in-law Harriet's controversial work in founding the first English religious orders since they were destroyed in the Protestant Reformation, John leapt to their defense with a May 1863 address, *English Sisterhoods*, which he later published, lauding their goodness and value, before he and Anne took a much-needed vacation in continental Europe, being in France by November 1863 and celebrating their anniversary in Rome in January 1864.

(Continued on Page 12)

(Continued from Page 11, "Featured Hymn")

His next volume of poetry, *The Passing Bell, and Other Poems*, John dedicated – finally – to his wife Anne, and the poems included one celebrating his third grandchild, a girl named Mary. It was published in 1866, the year John was turning 55. It was also the year of the case *Martin v. Mackonochie*, which had pitted the high church and low church factions within the Church of England against each other. John had by this point come to believe, as he later said, that “we can do without the one party as little as we could without the other,” and so began preaching on some of the changes he was instituting in his church's and chapel-of-ease's order of service.

In the next year, he published a book he called *Our New Vicar; or, Plain Words on Ritual and Parish Work*, with the intention, he said, “to bring in a familiar and easy way before the minds of ordinary readers the doctrines and practices of the English Church,” and holding up the *Book of Common Prayer* as “a common rule” that should unite the different Anglican parties. By the next year, teasing him over the title of his book, his parishioners had begun to nickname him “the old vicar.” Soon he published, in quick succession, two editions of another poetry collection: *Lights and Shadows; or, Double Acrostics*, using it to raise money to build a parsonage for one of his curates, admitting that “his parish is large” but “its income is small.”

The following year (1869), again writing prose, Rev. John Monsell put out yet another book: *The Rector and His Friends: Dialogues on Some of the Leading Religious Questions of the Day*, once more calling for reconciliation between these divided camps within the Church of England. He insisted that, while “we are all bound to believe the articles of the Christian faith,” nevertheless “the Christian faith, marked and distinct as are its outlines, is capable of infinite variety in its application to the wants of individuals.”

In May 1870, John was offered the rectory of Middleton. Though he declined that transfer, his bishop soon gave him instead the rectory of St. Nicholas Parish for Guildford, thus taking him away from Egham. All this while, he had begun to occasionally preach at the Chapel Royal of Savoy in London, sometimes to members of the royal family. As one contemporary commented, however, John was a better poet than preacher, because he preached off-the-cuff and, as a result, he tended to be overly wordy and didn't enunciate very well. This anonymous critic granted that John was a warm-hearted man but thought he “lacked the power of conciliation” when it came to disagreements – ironic, given John's mission of peace between the factions. However, even this critic had to concede that “all his hymns breathe the truest spirit of devotion, and they are all characterized by fine poetic power.”

Having published *Teachings of the Epiphany* in 1871 at the request of one of his new parishioners, he vacationed yet again in northern Italy in late 1872 but returned to edit *The Parish Hymnal, after the Order of the Book of Common Prayer*. It went to press early the next year, around the same time when Queen Victoria appointed him as one of her honorary chaplains. Now in his sixties and a grandfather to a growing number, he dedicated to two granddaughters his next publication, a book of illustrated *Nursery Carols*.

Meanwhile, little did John know what he was getting himself in for as his parish began to consider prospects for a new church building. John favored building a new church building on a new site closer to the rectory where he lived – not simply for convenience, but because he believed the town of Guildford was expanding in that direction, and so putting the church nearer the rectory would position it to be central real estate as the town grew and flourished. But in April 1873 came a crucial churchwarden election in the parish. Thomas Taunton would have preferred to keep the original church location and build a new church on it, but was amenable to Rev. Monsell's idea of a new site. However, Taunton lost to George Drewitt, who was steadfastly against any new church building at all, saying they should only make “repairs and necessary alterations” to the church building they already had.

By June, John himself weighed in publicly, insisting that the new church was God's will for the parish, despite the obstacles posed by George and others. He argued that the vestry's prior approval of the plan could only be taken back if they announced intention to reopen that question before holding the vote (so that interested parties could go to the meeting) and only of those who vote of reversing course were to “recoup the committee any moneys expended on the faith of such resolution.” Meanwhile, John had published yet another poetry collection – *Simon the Cyrenian, and Other Poems* – with sales used to raise funds for building the chancel of the new church.

(Continued on Page 13)

(Continued from Page 12, "Featured Hymn")

As a compromise plan, in July 1873, the parish vestry voted to approve the middle position, so that by January 1874 it could be written that "the perseverance of the rector [Rev. John Monsell] has overcome all obstacles and gained every point but one, and the new building is to rise phoenix-like from the ashes of the old. ... The work of demolition may be expected now to commence very shortly." But that would hardly end the controversy. The next churchwarden election was approaching in April 1874, and the vestry meeting on the day after Easter Sunday went on for a very heated three hours once John urged George to not stand for re-election, on the grounds (John said) that George was unwilling to do basic parts of his job, such as attend meetings faithfully or sign a petition to the bishop to approve the demolition of their present church building. George, deeply upset, lashed out with a considerable number of unkind charges against John, and expressed his fears that the new building would cost much more than budgeted. There ensued hours of argument (especially over whether the plans for the new church were big enough, and over the fact that the proposed enlargement of the church would disturb the graveyard), by the end of which John was insisting that "by God's blessing, we shall yet see the church complete. Opposition only makes me ten-fold more anxious." Ultimately, however, George was re-elected as churchwarden again, "after a most irregular discussion." John later charged that "there were some voting who had no right to vote."

Meanwhile, during Lent, John had been putting together a series of poems, hymns, and meditation exercises inspired by the Seven Last Words that Jesus said on the cross. This he published afterwards under the title *Watches by the Cross*, urging people to use it to "try our own hearts, and see how far the Divine Life is growing in us daily." But the progress toward a new church was *not* growing daily, as George and other opponents (especially William More-Molyneux) continued to slow progress with appeals for amendments to the plans, and as petty squabbles continued to play out in the local newspaper via dueling letters to the editor.

Later in August 1874, John's curate Rev. Robert Halcott Paul Ash was transferred out of the parish, to be replaced by a senior curate, the priest Rev. Robert Trevor Still, and a junior curate, the freshly ordained deacon Rev. William Herbert Moody. Rev. Still had scarcely been there long when, in early January 1875, his wife died in childbirth; John grieved deeply for his new curate and his two infant children. In the wake of the tragic loss, John began work on an extended poem in contemplation of death, which he titled "Nearer Home." Before finishing it, John read a portion of it to Trevor and "remarked that he thought his time here would not be long, that he had entered into the last decade of his life and already felt his Sabbath rest approaching; that the calm and quiet which life now had for him seemed to show that his end was drawing near."

That John felt his last decade upon him is hardly unreasonable – he was, after all, nearing his sixty-fourth birthday; his father had died at sixty-seven, his mother at sixty-nine. That John should consider his life now "calm and quiet" is by far more surprising. But by the end of August 1874, the sharp conflict had been put to rest. As John wrote:

We have come to this happy adjustment of all our difficulties by such concessions to the wishes of others as we felt necessary to secure the great blessing of peace ... It would be a sad church building that began with internal feuds or dissensions. We could hope for little good in connection with such a work. Thank God all that once made us vexed and anxious has passed away, and I feel confident that we shall have no further hindrance. To those who once opposed us, we have made every reasonable concession, and we doubt not that they will now prove as active and real helpers as they were once hinderers of our progress. I am now going out for my holiday. Before I come home, I trust to hear that the work is begun. That evidence of its reality once given, I shall resume my office of general beggar-man again as fresh as ever, and trust, with God's blessing, soon to set every anxious mind at rest on the subject of money. I feel certain that we shall get all we need when it is seen that we are actually engaged in building a really good and handsome church, such as becomes God's worship and the fair town of Guildford.

By October, work was so underway that the iron columns from the old church building were being auctioned off. No wonder that, after his return by November 1874, John felt a calm and quiet in his life. The foundations for the new church were being prepared by Christmas, although there remained some lingering complaints about the fact that the funds hadn't yet been raised to finish the project and build the church spire.

(Continued on Page 14)

(Continued from Page 13, "Featured Hymn")

As progress on the new church building approached completion through the early months of 1875, with a laying of the cornerstone planned for the Friday after Easter (April 2), John continued also to polish his poem about preparing for death. He mailed it off on the morning of Thursday, March 25, and then went to examine the construction site for St. Nicholas Church. However, while standing on a large stone to get a better look at the progress being made, it shifted beneath him, causing him to fall. He dislocated his shoulder and fractured his left arm from the harsh impact.

Those around him quickly rushed to his side, picked him up, and carried him off to the rectory, to which they called his doctor, Dr. James Remington Stedman. The following day, churchwarden Thomas Taunton reported to the public that "although Dr. Monsell has passed a night of considerable pain, he is progressing as favorably as could be hoped after so severe an accident." But within a few days, it was reported that John's heart had been affected. Eight days after his accident, on April 2, the foundation-laying ceremony for the church had to be conducted in his absence – he insisted they continue on without him. Bishop Harold Browne of Winchester, who delivered the closing message, cited John's "terrible accident" as "a special warning of how near we may be to the grave at any moment."

Although newspapers reported the next day that John was "now out of danger," yet he was admitted to still be "in a serious and critical condition." The following day (Sunday, April 4), Queen Victoria telegraphed her personal concern over reports of his injuries – (John was, after all, among Her Majesty's chaplains) – and requested to be kept updated; she later sent Dr. Stedman a follow-up telegram. Meanwhile, John was under the care of not only his local doctor but even the renowned Sir James Paget, the renowned English pathologist who served as surgeon extraordinary to Queen Victoria, came from London to see John.

Nevertheless, although his friends had held out hope for his recovery up until the morning of Friday, April 9, John's condition then took a turn for the worse again. By nightfall, "he knew his end was approaching; and, feeling (as he himself expressed it) that he was entering into his Sabbath, he died in perfect peace" around 10:30pm that evening, at the age of 64. Two days later, on Sunday, Rev. Still preached at the morning service on the Gospel line "I am the Good Shepherd," mentioning how personally kind John had been toward him and the flock. That evening, John's son-in-law Rev. Furse preached on the same verse. "He said Dr. Monsell had willingly yielded up his life, believing it to be for the good of the Church which he loved so much. He spoke of the love the deceased had shown for his people and said he had mentioned many of them by name privately to himself, telling them of the deep interest he had for some not yet converted. ... He also spoke of the calmness with which he looked forward to his departure..."

John's funeral services, lasting hours, were held on Wednesday, April 14, 1875, with two morning eucharistic services at the rectory oratory, followed by a funeral procession at noon, the tail end of which consisted of "all the workmen employed at the new church." When they reached the cemetery, two church choirs met them, singing some of John's own hymns. Over a thousand people were in attendance at his burial. John's large family continued to multiply after his demise. Among descendants of note, his granddaughter Elinor married a grandson of the noted scientist Charles Darwin; another grandson, Bolton Eyres-Monsell, became First Lord of the Admiralty; a great-grandson was the Arctic explorer Gino Watkins; John's great-granddaughter Joan married the famed travel writer Sir Patrick Leigh Fermor; and several of his grandsons (plus a grandson-in-law) were bishops.

For us, though, his legacy is found in his hymns, including the four simple verses presented for our consideration this month. It really isn't a complicated hymn, musically or lyrically, and so it won't take more than a page or so to unpack, at least enough of it for this month. Written in long meter but divided into four- and eight-beat segments, the rhyme scheme for each verse runs A.A.B.A.C.D.E.D – that is, the first two half-lines rhyme with each other and with the end of the second full line, and then the third and fourth lines each rhyme with each other.

Each verse is thematically separate from all the others; there's no escalating narrative at work here, just pure exhortation. Unlike many other hymns, this one has no words that are actually addressed to God in the second-person; rather, it's one we sing to each other – and, often, to ourselves. The cadence created by the rhyme scheme gives the hymn a potential 'manful' and courageous feel, one that St. Paul might have appreciated.

(Continued on Page 15)

(Continued from Page 14, "Featured Hymn")

The first verse – "Fight the good fight / with all thy might, / Christ is thy strength, and Christ thy right; / lay hold on Life, and it shall be / thy Joy and Crown eternally" – is adapted from St. Paul's language in 1 Timothy 6:12, which is the verse which John Monsell himself quoted to introduce his hymn both in *Songs from the Song of Songs* and in *Hymns of Love and Praise for the Church's Year*. That verse, in the King James Version he would have read, reads: "*Fight the good fight of faith, lay hold on eternal life, whereunto thou art also called, and has professed a good profession before many witnesses.*" When we sing this hymn, we accept and share the Apostle's direction to Timothy to "fight the good fight of faith," persisting and advancing in our pursuit of the good things God promises to those who love him, and fending off the temptations (pride, riches, error) that would hinder us.

Not only do we want to "fight the good fight," you should do it "with all thy might," just like Moses said that "*thou shalt love the LORD thy God with all thine heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy might*" (Deuteronomy 7:5). But when our own might seems insufficient to endure our circumstances, we remember that "*I can do all things through Christ which strengtheneth me*" (Philippians 4:13) – for "Christ is thy strength." "*Surely, shall one say, in the LORD I have righteousness and strength*" (Isaiah 45:24)! The challenge to "lay hold on life" is taken, again, from 1 Timothy 6:12, with the language of "*my joy and crown*" perhaps borrowed from Philippians 4:1.

The second verse tells us to "run the straight race / through God's good grace." We're elsewhere told to "*run with patience the race that is set before us*" (Hebrews 12:1). Of course, it isn't our own power that's able to let us run; we would be motionless toward God if not for God's good grace! "*And make straight paths for your feet,*" Hebrews 12:13 says, hence the reference here to "the straight race." The next line encourages us to "lift up thine eyes and seek his face," partly because this is common Old Testament language for focusing our hopes on God (e.g., "*I will lift up mine eyes unto the hills*" [Psalm 121:1]; "*Seek the LORD and his strength: seek his face forevermore*" [Psalm 105:4]), but also because, in the Hebrews 12 source that Rev. Monsell is adapting here, we're told that we should run our race while "*looking unto Jesus the author and finisher of our faith*" (Hebrews 12:2).

The rest of the verse tells us that "Life with its 'Way' before thee lies, / Christ is the path, and Christ the prize." What a beautiful way to put it! We know that Christ is "*the Way, the Truth, and the Life*" (John 14:6), as alluded to here. But that means that Christ is *both* the Path that we take when running the Christian race, and *also* the Prize that we receive when we finish. "*Know ye not that they which run in a race run all, but one receiveth the prize? So run, that ye may obtain!*" (1 Corinthians 9:24).

The third verse of the hymn tells us to "cast care aside / upon thy guide / lean, and his mercy will provide; / lean, and the trusting soul shall prove / Christ is thy life, and Christ thy love." Here we're drawing on the words of the Apostle Peter, who describes the Christian position as one of "*casting all your care upon him [God], for he careth for you*" (1 Peter 5:7). All our anxieties and our burdens, we may freely cast off of ourselves and let Christ carry them. We may instead restfully lean on him, like the Beloved Disciple did on Jesus' bosom at the Last Supper (John 13:23). If we do that, if we rest our weary head upon the heart of Christ, if we entrust ourselves completely to his providing mercy and generous care, then we'll find that he becomes everything we mean we say we live – and everything we mean when we say we love. For then "*the love of God is shed abroad in our hearts*" (Romans 5:5), then "*Christ may dwell in your hearts by faith*" (Ephesians 3:17).

The final verse reminds us to "faint not nor fear." Why not? Because "His arms are near!" Why is that a comfort against the sources of fear we have in this life? Because "he changeth not, and thou art dear." That is, Christ is the God who never changes, who's "*the same yesterday and today and forever*" (Hebrews 13:8) – and that includes the fact that he cherishes you, values you! So when his protecting and supporting arms are near, why should we weary, why should we be afraid? "*The Eternal God is thy refuge, and underneath are the everlasting arms*" (Deuteronomy 33:27). "*As we have received mercy, we faint not!*" (2 Corinthians 4:1).

What would it be like to really believe that, to live in the bold and confident assurance that you are cherished and defended by an Almighty Love who doesn't change, that you can lean on the heart that lives forever, that he runs the race of life with you and awaits you at the end as its reward, that he's a joyous crown worth persevering for? "Only believe, and thou shalt see / that Christ is all in all to thee!" (cf. Ephesians 1:23). So fight the good fight for him!

Preaching Calendar (January – February 2024)

Worship services commence at 10:00 AM on Sundays. We hope to see you there with us!

January 7 (Epiphany 1): (Communion Service)	Sermon Title: “Gold, Grain, and Glory” Scripture Reading: Psalm 72:1-4, 8-11, 15-19 “Eternal Source of Every Joy” (insert) “We Three Kings of Orient Are” (116)
January 14 (Epiphany 2):	Sermon Title: “Two Trees” Scripture Reading: Genesis 2:8-9, 15-17 “Teach Me Thy Will, O Lord” (381) “Jesus Calls Us O'er the Tumult” (491)
January 21 (Epiphany 3): (Congregational Meeting)	Sermon Title: “Lay Hold of Life” Scripture Reading: Genesis 2:8-9, 15-17 “Fight the Good Fight with All Thy Might” (458) “Hail! Tree of Life, Planted Anew” (insert)
January 28 (Septuagesima):	Sermon Title: “Fields of Freedom, Seeds of Doubt” Scripture Reading: Genesis 2:25–3:5 “I Need Thee Every Hour” (355) “Trust in the Lord with All Your Heart” (316)
February 4 (Sexagesima):	Sermon Title: “Useful, Pretty, Profitable, Toxic” Scripture Reading: Genesis 3:1-6 “O Jesus, I Have Promised” (496) “Do You Love the World?” (insert)
February 11 (Quinquagesima):	Sermon Title: “Shame and the Blame Game” Scripture Reading: Genesis 3:6-13 “Softly and Tenderly Jesus is Calling” (263) “On Man, in His Own Image Made” (insert)
February 18 (Quadragesima [Lent 1]):	Sermon Title: “Curses!” Scripture Reading: Genesis 3:7-19 “All Mankind Fell in Adam's Fall” (insert) “When the Curse is Lifted” (insert)
February 25 (Lent 2):	Sermon Title: “The Burning Blade at Our Backs” Scripture Reading: Genesis 3:21-24 “Eden Fair and Bright” (insert) “O Paradise, O Paradise” (insert)
March 3 (Lent 3):	Sermon Title: “The First Gospel” Scripture Reading: Genesis 3:14-15 “When by the Tempter's Wiles Betrayed” (insert) “Deceived by Subtle Snares of Hell” (insert)
March 10 (Laetare Sunday [Lent 4]):	Pastor Jonathan plans – God willing – to take vacation this Sunday. More information about the service will be forthcoming.

Quotes for Thought

“That bread is bread before the words of the sacraments; when consecration has been added, from bread it becomes the flesh of Christ. ... Before the words of Christ, the chalice is full of wine and water; when the words of Christ have been added, then blood is effected, which redeemed the people. So behold in what great respects the expression of Christ is able to change all things.”

– St. Ambrose of Milan

On the Sacraments 4.4-5 §§14, 23 (c. AD 390), in *Fathers of the Church: A New Translation* 44:302-305

“Everything we offer to God, especially the sacrifice of the altar, is offered as a vow. That sacrament declares that greatest vow of ours by which we vow that we will remain in Christ, that is, in the unity of the body of Christ. It is a sacred sign of the reality that we are one bread, one body. ... Then the bishops, like defense lawyers, offer to God's most merciful power those under their protection by the imposition of hands. After they have done this and have partaken of the sacrament, everything is ended with the thanksgiving.”

– St. Augustine of Hippo

Letter 149.16, to Paulinus of Nola (AD 416), in *The Works of Saint Augustine* II/2:368

“How many emperors have waged war against the Church of Christ, how many tyrants have oppressed her? But even though for a short while they were given leave like frothing sea waves that dash against a firm rock, they were broken up, for the gates of Hades shall never prevail against her. For they are men, and they die as men...; while the Church indeed has crowned herself with the trophy of immortality.”

– Patriarchs Christopher I of Alexandria, Job of Antioch, and Basil of Jerusalem

Letter to Emperor 13.b-c (c. AD 836), in *The Letter of the Three Patriarchs to Emperor Theophilos* (Porphyrogenitus, 1997), 76

“Though Christ redeemed the faithful once and for all by his death, yet the Church must repeat this sacrament each day for three reasons. One reason is so that those who labor in the vineyard might be refreshed by it daily. Another is so that those who are daily added to the faithful's number may be incorporated by it. The third is to daily etch the commemoration of Christ's Passion into the faithful's minds for them to imitate.”

– Honorius Augustodunensis

Jewel of the Soul 1.36 (c. AD 1120), in *Dumbarton Oaks Medieval Library* 79:75

“Serve God with all your heart ... This will give you much joy both here on earth and beyond. ... Do not allow sadness to weigh you down! If you are shaken awake by suffering, then this means a special grace from God, since this grace rescues you from the hell-hole. ... I am greatly amazed that we rely so much on this world although we can clearly see where it will take us. Where are my friends and companions? Where did my parents and forefathers disappear? Where will we all be in five hundred years?”

– Oswald von Wolkenstein

Poems 11.6-7 (c. AD 1425), in *The Poems of Oswald von Wolkenstein* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 63

“When the congregation gathers in the Lord's house on holy days, God himself has indeed so commanded and prescribed it. ... At the altar, however, no matter how many are gathered there..., there is no crowd at the altar. He himself is personally present, and he knows those who are his own.”

– Soren Kierkegaard

Christian Discourses 4.3 (AD 1848), in *Discourses at the Communion on Fridays* (Indiana University Press, 2011), 56, 59

“Get down to the Father's business. The world cannot save itself, the man cannot be saved except through Jesus the Savior of men. It all comes back to the church which he founded looking forward to a kingdom yet to come. Not that mere belonging to the church will save anyone, but that Jesus our Lord has entrusted to his church the means of salvation. And 'except ye repent' and 'except ye are born again' and 'except ye eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, there is no life in you.' ... For nothing counts in the end except that which we have connected up with the Father's business. Everything we do that we cannot take with us when we die or is connected up with God when we face the pearly gates, is, after all, wasted.”

– Peter George Sieger, pastor of Emmanuel Lutheran Church, Lancaster

“A Sermon for Today: The Father's Business,” *Lancaster Sunday News* (27 January 1924): 11

PRAYER GUIDE

- *We praise God* for all the wondrous blessings he's given us, most notably the ministry of his Son (in death, resurrection, and exaltation to the Father's right hand) and the gift of his Holy Spirit; and *we pray* that God would glorify his name above all else and would bring his kingdom more fully to earth.
- *We pray for our denomination, our congregation, and the church universal*, that God would bless us at all levels with faithfulness, wisdom, vision, and fortitude to earnestly labor in his vineyard.
 - *We pray particularly for* our pastor **Rev. Jonathan J. Brown** and for **our church board**.
 - *We pray also for* **our Evangelical Congregational Church leadership**: our bishop **Randy Sizemore**, executive director **Kevin Henry**, and district field director **Keith Miller**; the **Global Ministries Community** under **Ted Rathman**; the **Kingdom Extension Community** under **Mike Snedeker**; the **Church Health Community** under **Gary Kuehner**; the **Missional Alignment Community** under **Bishop Randy Sizemore**; and the **Ministerial Development Community** under **Matthew Hill**.
- *We pray for our missionary partners* (such as **Dan Quigley** and others), that God would keep them safe and faithful, would focus their efforts on God's work, and would grant success in accordance with his holy will.
- *We pray for other churches and pastors in our community*, that God would keep all congregations united in one holy faith and devoted to the ardent service of one and the same kingdom and of its King, Jesus.
- *We pray for the salvation of our whole community and its maturation in Christian discipleship*, knowing that there is hope in Jesus for all people and for entire communities to reflect the righteous love of God.
- *We pray for an end to disease outbreaks*: COVID-19, mpox, cholera, dengue, diphtheria, anthrax, flu, RSV.
- *We pray for those suffering in the wake of disasters around the world*, that God would have mercy:
 - *We pray for* those afflicted by natural disasters such as famine; storms in Argentina, Australia, and America; tornadoes in Tennessee; the volcanic eruption in Indonesia; flooding in Tanzania, Congo, South Africa, and Oregon; landslides in Tanzania, Congo, Venezuela; earthquakes in Philippines, China; etc.
 - *We pray for* those afflicted by accidents such as the helicopter crash in Guyana; bus/truck accidents in Philippines, Thailand, Honduras, and India; the subway pile-up in China; the boat sinking in Libya; the mine accident in China; pile-ups in Venezuela and Turkey; explosions in the Seychelles, India, Guinea, Liberia, Michigan; fires in Italy, Brazil, Indonesia, South Korea, Romania; the wall collapse in Tunisia.
- *We pray also for those victimized by violence and social ills, especially the Israel-Hamas war and Russian invasion of Ukraine*, that God would make his peace manifest to the injured, traumatized, and grieving.
 - *We pray additionally for* those afflicted by the Uyghur genocide in China; civil war in Syria, Somalia, Yemen, Sudan, Myanmar, etc.; India-Pakistan, Kyrgyzstan-Tajikistan, and Armenia-Azerbaijan conflicts; insurgency in Egypt, Colombia, Chad, Cameroon, Congo, the Maghreb, Nigeria, Niger, India, Burkina Faso, Uganda, Mozambique, Pakistan, South Sudan, Turkey, Indonesia, Iran, Iraq, Peru, and Libya; gang/cartel wars in Mexico, Ecuador, and Haiti; kidnappings; protest-related violence around the world; airstrikes or rocket attacks in Ukraine, Israel, Gaza, Syria, Iraq, Western Sahara, etc.; mass shootings in Pakistan, Belgium, Russia, Switzerland, Ecuador, Iran, Mexico, Czechia, and Nevada; shootouts in Mexico, Jordan, and elsewhere; stabbings in France and New York; bombings in the Philippines (at a worship service), Pakistan, Benin, and elsewhere; the vehicle-ramming attack in Indiana; ambushes in Mali, Nigeria, and elsewhere; massacres in Uganda, Central African Republic, and Nigeria; the humanitarian crisis in Gaza; vandalism and attacks on churches (especially in Nigeria); the mistaken drone strike in Nigeria; the American opioid epidemic; human rights violations (e.g., abortion and human trafficking); the rising wave of antisemitism and other ideologies of hatred; and the refugee crisis.
- *We pray for* all who serve and protect us, including **civic leaders, police, firefighters, medical responders, and members of the military**: May God keep them safe, just, wise, sincere, humble, and accountable.
- *We pray for our nation and its government* at all levels and in all branches, that God would move our leaders to repent of unjust or unmerciful practices and laws; that God would crown them with wisdom, security, peace, and civility toward all; and that God would give them godly hearts to live and govern rightly.
- *We pray for the persecutors and maligners of the church around the world*:
 - *We pray for* the conversion of terrorists and other people of violence into disciples of the Prince of Peace.
 - *We pray for* the wisdom of God to be made manifest to skeptics and critics.
 - *We pray for* the Spirit's boldness to fill the hearts of all believers to witness to Jesus in life and in death.

PRAYER GUIDE

- *We pray for the families and friends of many who have entered their rest in the past year, including:*
 - For the family of **Bob Forrey**, who entered rest on January 5, 2023.
 - For the family of **Paul Bauman** (Joyce Good's brother), who entered rest on January 6, 2023.
 - For the family of **June Harter** (Sue Eshelman's mother), who entered rest on January 24, 2023.
 - For the family of **Darlene Young**, who entered rest on February 1, 2023.
 - For the family of **Mike Diem**, who entered rest on February 8, 2023.
 - For the family of **Alvin Wise** (Jean Hess' uncle), who entered rest on February 22, 2023.
 - For the family of **Grace Sprecher** (Sharon Mast's aunt), who entered rest on February 22, 2023.
 - For the family of **Herman Martin**, who entered rest on February 25, 2023.
 - For the family of **Leon Hartranft**, who entered rest on March 11, 2023.
 - For the family of **Amanda Hoffert**, who entered rest on March 11, 2023.
 - For the family of **Lois Gift**, who entered rest on March 20, 2023.
 - For the family of **William Riegel** (Del's brother-in-law), who entered rest on March 27, 2023.
 - For the family of **Darryl Imler** (Leroy Stoltzfus' nephew), who entered rest on April 1, 2023.
 - For the family of **Glenn Weber**, who entered rest on April 4, 2023.
 - For the family of **Clarence Jones** (Floyd Mast's uncle), who entered rest on April 11, 2023.
 - For the family of **Linda Wonder** (Sharon Mast's stepmother), who entered rest on April 27, 2023.
 - For the family of **John Herr** (Abby Eberly's friend), who entered rest on April 29, 2023.
 - For the family of **Sherry Stoltzfus** (Esther's sister-in-law's mother), who entered rest on May 4, 2023.
 - For the family of **Jim Brubaker**, who entered rest on May 5, 2023.
 - For the family of **Clarence Bauman** (Joyce Good's brother), who entered rest on June 17, 2023.
 - For the family of **Ben Schweitzer** (Kim Sweigart's son-in-law's friend), who entered rest July 10, 2023.
 - For the family of **Mary Martin** (Abby Eberly's friend's sister), who entered rest on July 15, 2023.
 - For the family of **Ray Snader**, who entered rest on July 17, 2023.
 - For the family of **John Kendig** (Sharon Mast's brother-in-law), who entered rest on July 19, 2023.
 - For the family of **Mary Skiba** (Sally Arment's cousin), who entered rest on August 20, 2023.
 - For the family of **Ivan Zimmerman** (Ray Snader's brother-in-law), who entered rest on August 22, 2023.
 - For the family of **Della Bollinger** (Floyd Mast's aunt), who entered rest on August 27, 2023.
 - For the family of **Harley Steenhoek** (the Walkers' grandpa), who entered rest on September 2, 2023.
 - For the family of **Elsie Martin** (Jean Hess's great-aunt), who entered rest on September 8, 2023.
 - For the family of **Clarence Good** (Jean Hess's uncle), who entered rest on September 13, 2023.
 - For the family of **Luke Ringler** (Abby's son-in-law's brother), who entered rest on September 25, 2023.
 - For the family of **Pat Street** (Nancy Mountz's sister), who entered rest on September 27, 2023.
 - For the family of **Daniel Newswanger** (Mabel's husband), who entered rest on October 8, 2023.
 - For the family of **Joyce Martin** (Jean Hess's cousin), who entered rest on October 11, 2023.
 - For the family of **Shirley Riggins** (Deb Messner's mother), who entered rest on October 13, 2023.
 - For the family of **Titus Burkholder** (Leon Hess's cousin), who entered rest on October 16, 2023.
 - For the family of **Erwin Sensenig Jr.** (Sally Arment's brother), who entered rest on November 7, 2023.
 - For the family of **Henrietta Hoshauer**, who entered rest on November 18, 2023.
 - For the family of **Bob Schade** (Cindy Ruth's uncle), who entered rest on November 23, 2023.
 - For the family of **Harvey Sauder**, who entered rest on November 25, 2023.
 - For the family of **David Kulp**, who entered rest on November 27, 2023.
 - For the family of **Bill Sprecher** (Sharon Mast's uncle), who entered rest on December 4, 2023.
 - For the family of **April Shirk** (Joan Swayze's daughter), who entered rest on December 7, 2023.
 - For the family of **Evaleen Weinhold** (Joan Swayze's aunt), who entered rest on December 16, 2023.
 - For the family of **Dot Yohn** (Shirley's daughter's mother-in-law), who entered rest on January 3, 2024.
 - May the Lord give immeasurable peace, strength, and comfort to all who face loss and grief.

PRAYER GUIDE

- *We pray for all dementia sufferers* and for **their caretakers**, that God would lighten burdens, restore clarity to injured minds, and speak directly to hearts and souls with his comfort, his peace, and the light of grace.
- *We pray for all suffering from cancer* – (including Randy Vandill, Cindy Ebersole, Troy Frey, Lisa Mast, Sue Stoltzfus [Lee and Martha's daughter-in-law], Betty Kennedy [Del Ream's niece-in-law], Earl Martin [Miriam Rissler's brother-in-law], Adrienne Hedges [Brenna Pammer's friend], Donna and Brandy Rhodes [Pastor Jonathan's aunt and cousin], Doris Snader, Gene Sensenig, Lori Zimmerman, Rev. Marlin Lafferty, Rev. Don Wert, etc.) – that God shield them from pain, restore and comfort them, and bless their doctors.
- *We pray for the other assorted health concerns (and other needs) of:*
 - Earl and Pauline Good + John Good (Earl's brother) + David Good
 - Floyd Mast + Steven Mast (Floyd's son) + Cindy Bannon + Marilyn Wilson (Cindy's mother)
 - Barry Ream + Delores Jaxel + Clair Kohl + Jeff Kohl + Henry Kohl + Shawn and Candace Sweigart
 - Cherri Snader + Jim Becker + Larry and Cookie White
 - Linda Burkholder + Mary Andrews + Raymond Bannon
 - Barty Messner + Edna Binner + Shannon Messner
 - Brandon Wilson + Floyd Heuyard + Don Pickle
 - Violet Stauffer + Paul Ford + Lori Zimmerman + Betty Musser
 - Jerry Felpel and Doris Getz + Dawn Acevedo (Cindy Hoffer's sister)
 - Josh Kendig (Sharon Mast's son) + Connie Dieter (Leon and Jean Hess's daughter)
 - Larsen Houck (Shirley Good's great-grandson) + Kayley Smith (the Hesses' granddaughter)
 - Kathryn Shirk (Jean Hess's aunt) + Sonya Shirey (Jean's friend) + Dennis Wanner
 - Ray Arment + Butch and Mike Skiba + Emily Sensenig + Jeannine Sensenig
 - Sharon Geib (Deb Kimmel's sister) + Cassie Geib (Sharon Geib's mother-in-law)
 - Veanna Baxter + Julia Reed (Veanna's sister) + Shirley Buchanan
 - Jeremy Kurman + Warren Weinhold + Jody Freeman
 - Jess Pennepacker + Charles Yingst + Ralph Mountz
 - Carl and Grace Nolt + Vera Kochel + Carl Martin
 - Robert and Barbara Sparr + Rodger Whittaker
 - Abby Eberly + Linda Sweitzer (Abby's friend)
 - Elizabeth Zimmerman (John Eberly's sister)
 - Dorothy Long (Sharon Mast's boss's sister)
 - Madelynne Walker + Ben + Tim + Minerva Hufford
 - Troy Frey and both of his parents + Tory Lingg
 - Ken Keen and Nancy Fox (Floyd Mast's friends)
 - Donna Sensenig + Larry Sensenig + Daryll Sensenig
 - Bob Buckwalter (Abby Eberly's friend's husband)
 - Alice Vidzicki (Deb Kimmel's friend's mother)
 - Delores, Jeremiah, and Bobby Snader + Ben Doullin + Shirley Sweigart
 - Carol Briggs (Ruth Snader's sister) + Ken Cochran (Ruth's cousin-in-law)
 - Linda Talbot (Cindy Ruth's sister) + Tom Schwer (Sharon Mast's stepbrother)
 - Cathy Bullock (Cindy Ruth's neighbor) + Ken Styer + Bret Hoffert + Jethro Hursh
 - Rebecca Lucas (the Walkers' family friend) + Rebecca Horst + Dillon Dewire + Barb Kern
 - Linda Ebert (Barb's friend) + the Bowmans (Barb's cousins) + Danielle (Barb's grandson's girlfriend)
- *We pray for other neighbors, friends, and believers in need*, that God would heal, provide, and comfort.
- *We pray for a fresh outpouring of the Holy Spirit* upon our church, our community, our county, our nation, the Evangelical Congregational Church, and the church universal. *We pray for the whole church to be filled with a spiritual zeal for worship, evangelism, and discipleship. May the fires of revival fall!*
- *We praise God for all the prayers we've seen him answer and for his everlasting faithfulness!*